Choral Music of Samuel Barber
By Joshua Shank

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Barber’s vocal output is vast. He himself had trained as a baritone, though he ultimately chose not to pursue a career as a singer because, as he put it, “Onstage I have about as much projection as a baby skunk.” Despite his familiarity with the voice, his choral output is modest in comparison to his art songs, and the vast majority of his pieces for choir can be presented in a single concert.

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“God’s Grandeur” begins with a thunderous declaration before the music literally flames out into a cavernous silence. The piece uses a poem by English poet Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889) who became posthumously famous for his use of imagery and his explorations into what he called “sprung rhythm.” Barber originally conceived the work as the third movement to his 1930 work Motetto on Words from the Book of Job, but it was premiered separately in 1938.

His treatment of the text is at times quite dark. Eventually he abandons the wandering material and divides the choir into two separate ensembles which dialogue back and forth. The music is jubilant and reminiscent of the Baroque period, a favorite of Barber’s. “Look at Bach,” he once said. “You play it on the harmonica, the guitar, or the organ. It’s always wonderful.”

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?

Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man’s smudge and shares man’s smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feet, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;
There he lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs--
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

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Barber’s first published piece for chorus, “The Virgin Martyrs,” is scored solely for women’s voices. The work uses a translation of a Latin text by a medieval Belgian monk which praises female martyrs. The first stanza of the poetry lists them out as the music twists around itself trying to find an emotion to settle on. After all this wandering we eventually come to rest on a gentle chord on the text “Worthy now of God’s company.” The effect is striking, and the music immediately turns inward as the martyred
women gather up flowers to make a bouquet “for love.”

It’s worth noting that Barber wrote this piece in 1935 at the age of 25. Women in the United States had only had the right to vote for 15 years at this point so his choice of subject matter – an elegy for female saints – is interesting to note in that context.

*Therefore come they, the crowding maidens,*
*Gertrude, Agnes, Prisca, Cecily,*
*Lucy, Thekla, Juliana, Barbara,*
*Agatha, Petronel, and other maids*  
*Whose names I have read not and now record not,*
*But their souls and their faith were maimed not.*

*Worthy now of God’s company.*  
*Wand’ring through the fresh fields go they,*
*Gath’ring flowers to make them a nosegay*  
*Gath’ring roses red for the Passion,*
*Lilies and violets for love.*

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“Let down the bars, O death” was written in the same summer as the landmark string quartet which eventually yielded the Adagio for Strings, and while that orchestral work went on to become synonymous with grief, its choral sibling is the one of the two that was actually performed at Barber’s funeral in 1981. Of that event, Gian Carlo Menotti recalled:

“He had a wonderful sense of humor, and he loved to shock people with unconventional phrases and actions. He loved good food, and one of his favorite things was a good soup with French croutons sprinkled on. He said: ‘When I die, please remember I don’t want flowers, I just want croutons. Get a sack of croutons and sprinkle them over my coffin.’ That we did. Some friends of his baked some bread and made croutons. I didn’t have the courage to do it, but as his coffin was lowered three of his friends sprinkled croutons. I could just see Sam laughing.”

There is no trace of the impish side of Barber in “Let down the bars, O death.” In fact, he seems to have made an effort to stay out of the way of Emily Dickinson’s text altogether. The composer – who was extraordinarily adept at writing complicated, interlocking counterpoint – set her poem as a simple chorale. The piece lasts only 30 measures and of its eight lines only two ever repeat: “Let down the bars, O Death – The tired Flocks come in.” At first we hear them as an invocation sung in hushed tones that crescendo into the remainder of the work. When he eventually brings the same music back, it is unchanged except that the dynamics are now in reverse. The whisper that began the work is now a declamation, meant to shout open the door before letting Dickinson’s “tired flocks” gently slip away.

*Let down the bars, O Death!*
*The tired flocks come in,*
*Whose bleating ceases to repeat,*
*Whose wandering is done.*

*Thine is the stillest night,*
*Thine the securest fold;*
Too near thou art for seeking thee,  
Too tender to be told.

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The remaining three movements of Motetto on Words from the Book of Job feature Biblical excerpts rendered in fairly simple forms: a plodding march, a frenetic madrigal paired with a lamentation, and a capricious song that lives up to its title. They are young works to be sure, but when we’re reminded that only six years later Barber would go on to write the most enduring orchestral work in American music, these brief pieces (written at the age of 20) take on a fascinating significance.

There the wicked cease
There the wicked cease from troubling,
And the weary be at rest;
There the prisoners rest together,
They hear not the voice of th’oppressor.
The small and the great are there,
And the servant is free from his master.
   -Job 3:17-19

Call now!
Call now, if there be any that will answer thee!
And to which of the saints wilt thou turn?
Canst thou by searching find out God?
He is as high as heav’n; what canst thou do?
Deeper than hell; what canst thou know?
Yet man is born to trouble,
As the sparks fly upward.
I would seek unto God.
   -Job 5:1, 11:7-8, 5:7-8

Praise Him!
Praise Him! Then shalt thou forget thy misery,
And remember it as waters pass’d away.
And thou shalt be secure because there is peace!
Thou shalt shine forth, thou shalt be as the morning!
Praise Him! Amen.
   -Job 9:16-17

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“Twelfth night” begins with the line “No night could be darker than this night,” and the strained, sometimes dissonant music never looks back. Here Barber paints anguish and despair over a text by English poet Laurie Lee (1914-1997) which joins Christ’s birth to the earth’s reawakening from “utter death.” At the mention of “men with shepherd’s eyes,” the music tightens like a vice before building to a climax a few pages later. The piece ends on a defeated note; repeating the same lonely text that began it.

No night could be darker than this night,
No cold so cold,
As the blood snaps like a wire,
And the heart’s sap stills,
And the year seems defeated.

O never again, it seems, can green things run,
Or sky birds fly,
Or the grass exhale its humming breath,
Powdered with pimpernels,
From this dark lung of winter.

Yet here are lessons for the final mile
Of pilgrim kings;
The mile still left when all have reached
Their tether’s end:
That mile where the Child lies hid.

For see, beneath the hand,
The earth already warms and glows;
For men with shepherd’s eyes
There are signs in the dark,
The turning stars,
The lamb’s returning time.

Out of this utter death he’s born again,
His birth our saviour;
From terror’s equinox he climbs and grows,
Drawing his finger’s light across our blood
The sun of heaven,
And the son of god.

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“To Be Sung on the Water” begins with hollow harmonies similar to its predecessor, but Barber quickly takes us someplace else. Here the tenors and basses repeat three words (as if to suggest the sound of oars rippling in the water) while the sopranos and altos take on the bulk of a text by American poet Louise Bogan (1897-1970). The men briefly give up their rowing duties to the women, but over the course of the movement these two sections of the choir never sing anything together. There is an unnamed distance between them – which perhaps we’re not meant to know – but in the end it seems to be given voice in the resigned, melancholy chord that finishes the piece.

Beautiful, my delight,
Pass, as we pass the wave,
Pass, as the mottled night
Leaves what it cannot save,
Scattering dark and bright.

Beautiful, pass and be
Less than the guiltless shade
To which our vows were said;
Less than the sound of an oar
To which our vows were made,
Less then the sound of its blade
Barber conducted the premiere of “A stopwatch and an ordnance map” himself. At the time he was directing the Madrigal Chorus at his alma mater The Curtis Institute, and decided to write a piece for the men of the ensemble. The work also includes a timpanist and uses a text by the English poet Stephen Spender (1909-1995), which describes the death of a soldier in the Spanish Civil War. The music is intentionally spooky with an air of dread ruling the proceedings. A review from a 1943 performance in the National Gallery called it “sinister…with a threat of disaster in every measure.”

“A stopwatch and an ordnance map” was premiered on January 28, 1940. Five months earlier, Germany had invaded Poland. Barber served in the Air Force during the war, and as part of his duties was tasked to move pianos and heavy, old radios that had outlived their use. He was eventually commissioned by the military to write his (now withdrawn) Symphony Dedicated to the Air Force. At one point he was called on to play the work-in-progress for a commanding officer and recalled the man saying, “Well, corporal, it’s not quite what we expected from you. Since the Air Force uses all sorts of the most modern technical devices, I hope you’ll write this symphony in quarter-tones. But do what you can, do what you can, corporal.”

Perhaps he should have shown the man “A stopwatch…” instead. Immediately before the men begin singing “He stayed faithfully in that place,” the timpanist sets about sliding the pitches of the drums with the tuning pedals and Barber, a composer who was looked at as somewhat old-fashioned during his lifetime, sounds decidedly “modern.”

A stopwatch and an ordnance map.
At five a man fell to the ground
And the watch flew off his wrist
Like a moon struck from the earth
Marking a blank time that stares
On the tides of change beneath.
All under the olive trees.

A stopwatch and an ordnance map.
He stayed faithfully in that place
From his living comrade split
By dividers of the bullet
Opening wide the distances
Of his final loneliness.
All under the olive trees.

A stopwatch and an ordnance map.
And the bones are fixed at five
Under the moon’s timelessness;
But another who lives on
Wears within his heart forever
Space split open by the bullet.
All under the olive trees.
Throughout the 1960s, Barber penned numerous arrangements of previously-written material. “Heaven haven: A nun takes the veil” was originally a song for voice and piano (on a poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins) from his Four Songs, Op. 13. In its transformation from art song to choral piece, the piano part was curiously left out by the composer. However, given the desire for refuge in the poetry, perhaps he felt a pianist might intrude on the delicate music.

I have desired to go
Where springs not fail,
To fields where flies no sharp and sided hail
And a few lilies blow.

And I have asked to be
Where no storms come,
Where the green swell is in the havens dumb,
And out of the swing of the sea.

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Written in 1938, “Sure on this shining night” went on to become one of the composer’s most famous and oft-performed art songs before he arranged it for choir thirty years later. Using a text by American poet James Agee (1909-1955), Barber writes music that is sublime and reverent as it reflects the poetry. Once the final chord is played, it’s easy to see why the piece is so beloved by singers.

Sure on this shining night
Of starmade shadows round,
Kindness must watch for me
This side the ground.

The late year lies down the north.
All is healed, all is health.
High summer holds the earth,
Hearts all whole.

Sure on this shining night
I weep for wonder
Wand 'ring far alone
Of shadows on the stars.

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In 1936, Barber wrote his only work for string quartet and almost immediately arranged its second movement for a full string orchestra. The new piece, Adagio for Strings, was programmed by the famed Italian conductor Arturo Toscanini – a sort of classical kingmaker at the time – and its composer became an overnight sensation. The Adagio has gone on to become something of a universal expression of grief, and in arranging it for choir in 1968, Barber pulls the music even closer to this notion by laying it over the “Agnus Dei” from the Roman Catholic mass. The result is a meditation which unfolds itself in endless spirals before the bottom drops out and it rises to a deafening climax. Then the supplicating cries waft gently back into the ether.

Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy upon us.
Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy upon us.
Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, grant us peace.
-sung in Latin

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Reincarnations is a set of three pieces written for the Curtis Institute Madrigal Chorus which he conducted from 1938-1941. That title doesn’t refer to the subject matter of the three texts by Irish poet James Stephens (1882-1950) but instead refers to the entire set of poems Stephens wrote based on the work of 19th century poet Anthony Raftery. Stephens could barely speak Gaelic so, when he set out to translate Raftery’s work, he wound up with something more than just simple translations. He called the results a set of “reincarnations.”

“Mary Hynes” is named after a woman purported to be the most beautiful in all of western Ireland and Barber sets the text with a sort of ecstatic lyricism. He slows the singers down for the second stanza and forces them to tread lightly before they settle into the billowy final phrase on the word “airily.”

She is the sky of the sun!
She is the dart of love!
She is the love of my heart!
She is a rune!

She is above the women of the race of Eve,
As the sun is above the moon!

Lovely and airy the view from the hill
That looks down Ballylea!
But no good sight is good,
Until you see the blossom of the branches
Walking towards you, airily.

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The character who inspired the poem for “Anthony O’Daly” was an Irish environmentalist unjustly accused of firing a gun at another man. He was eventually condemned, and refusing offers from the guards to help him escape, went quietly and was hanged. The text focuses almost solely on the sense of disbelief at the finality of loss, and the resultant music is numb in comparison to anything else in Reincarnations. The basses sit grief-stricken on a single note for a full 41 measures, and when they finally take up the melody, it is transformed into a thrashing torrent of sound which halts on the word “grief,” a cold silence experienced at the sudden loss of a loved one.

Since your limbs were laid out
The stars do not shine!
The fish leap not out in the waves!
On our meadows
The dew does not fall in the morn,
For O Daly is dead!

Not a flow’r can be born!
Not a word can be said!
Not a tree have a leaf!
Anthony! After you there is nothing to do!
There is nothing but grief!

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“The Coolin” takes its name from the curly lock of blond hair at the nape of the neck (which eventually became used as a nickname for a loved one). Of his poem, James Stephens said, “I sought to represent that state which is almost entirely a condition of a dream, wherein the passion of love has almost overreached itself, and is sinking to a motionless languor.” Barber seems to have taken him at his word and the music is luxuriant and warm. We dwell for a moment at the edge of the phrase “And a lip to find out a lip,” before tenderly fading back into the same music which opened the movement.

Come with me, under my coat,
And we will drink our fill
Of the milk of the white goat,
Or wine if it be thy will.
And we will talk until talk is a trouble too,
Out on the side of the hill;
And nothing is left to do,
But an eye to look into an eye,
And a hand in a hand to slip;
And a sigh to answer a sigh;
And a lip to find out a lip!

What if the night be black,
Or the air on the mountain chill,
Where all but the fern is still!
Stay with me, under my coat,
And we will drink our fill
Of the milk of the white goat,
Out on the side of the hill!

“The Lovers” will be performed before “Easter Chorale”

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“Easter Chorale” was commissioned in honor of the dedication of the massive central tower of the National Cathedral in May of 1964 and originally appeared as a work for brass and timpani. Later that year, Barber added choral parts on a text by Pack Browning. The text features numerous references to nature (a common theme in the composer’s work) as a symbol of the risen Christ, which Barber enlivens through his music while never distracting from the poetry. Robert Kyr’s new version of “Easter Chorale” uses the contrasting sections of the thirteen-player chamber orchestra (woodwinds, brass, strings) to color each verse of the text, gradually building in intensity until the final proclamation rings out in triumphant majesty: "We listen to the live earth sing/And praise our loving Source and Spring."

The morning light renews the sky.
Across the air the birds ignite
Like sparks to take this blaze of day
Through all the precincts of the night.
Alleluia! Alleluia!

The first of dawn refresh our eyes.
We watch the world grow wide and bright
And praise our newly risen Light.

The winter land receives the year.
Her smallest creatures rouse and cling
To swelling roots and buds that stir
The restless air to reel and ring!
Alleluia! Alleluia!

The sounds of waking fill our ears.
We listen to the live earth sing
And praise our loving Source and Spring.

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The Lovers
Music by Samuel Barber, new chamber version by Robert Kyr
Notes by Robert Kyr

When Craig Hella Johnson asked me to create a new version of Samuel Barber’s The Lovers for baritone, chamber chorus, and chamber orchestra, I was overjoyed. First, I consider The Lovers (on poetry of Pablo Neruda) to be one of the few American choral-orchestral masterworks of the twentieth century. Moreover, I have always felt that it would receive many more performances in a smaller version that is better suited to the sublime intimacy of Neruda’s poetry.

Barber created The Lovers during the years when his longtime romantic and domestic partnership with Gian Carlo Menotti (the acclaimed opera composer) was deteriorating (1969-71), and he was still haunted by the failure of Antony and Cleopatra at the Metropolitan Opera (1966). His life experience is reflected in the despair of Neruda’s poetic exploration of love (both erotic and spiritual) and its loss, which might also relate to his romance with Valentin Herranz, to whom the work is dedicated and who suggested the text to him. (Later, Valentin became Barber’s personal assistant and valet until the end of his life.)

When you hear the music, imagine the anguish of its composer as he faced these difficulties and gradually became overwhelmed by his unconscious wounds and vulnerabilities, which further stoked the fires of love gone wrong. And into this toxic brew, mix his suffering from the societal prejudice against homosexuality, as well as his worsening alcoholism.

Given this context, one better understands why Barber chose Neruda’s passionate song of despair, and why the music connects us so vividly to a situation that no one can escape. In some sense, our greatest loves remain with us equally and always – those we kept and those we lost. In this regard, Barber’s musical approach to the text ultimately helps us to heal our losses for the purpose of more fully experiencing the totality of love in all of its joys and sorrows.

In light of this understanding, I have strived to create a more playable and affordable version of Barber’s masterpiece without sacrificing any of its spiritual intensity. While I have not changed a single note or rhythm of the vocalists, the orchestral music has been radically transformed: the sound of a gargantuan eighty-piece ensemble has been morphed into a fifteen-player chamber orchestra. This sonic magic act is intended to give a stronger presence to the sensuality and intimacy of Neruda’s visionary poetry.
My new version of *The Lovers* is dedicated to Craig Hella Johnson, David Farwig, and Conspirare, and to the memory of Lee Hoiby, who was a devoted champion of Barber’s music.

**I. Body of a woman**

Body of a woman, white hills, white thighs,  
You look like a world, lying in surrender.  
My rough peasant’s body digs in you,  
And makes the son leap from the depth of the earth.  
I was alone—like a tunnel, the birds fled from me,  
And night swamped me with its crushing invasion.  
To survive myself I forged you like a weapon,  
Like an arrow in my bow, a stone in my sling.

But the hour of vengeance falls and I love you.  
Body of skin, of moss, of eager and firm milk.  
Oh the goblets of the breast! Oh the eyes of absence!  
Oh the roses of the pubis! Oh your voice, slow and sad!

Body of my woman, I will persist in your grace.  
My thirst, my boundless desire, my shifting road!  
Dark river-beds where the eternal thirst flows  
And weariness follows, and the infinite ache.

**II. Lithe girl, brown girl**

Lithe girl, brown girl,  
The sun that makes apples,  
And stiffens the wheat,  
And splits the thongweed,  
Made your body with joy.

Your tongue like a red bird  
Dancing on ivory,  
Your lips with the smile of water.

You stretch out your arms  
And the sun grabs  
At the loose black coils  
Of your hair  
As if water were falling.

Tantalize the sun if you dare,  
It will leave  
Shadows that match you everywhere.  
Lithe girl, brown girl,  
Lithe girl, brown girl,  
Nothing draws me towards you,  
And the heat within you  
Beats me home  
Like the sun at high noon.
Knowing these things,
Perhaps through knowing these things
I seek you out.
Ah! Listening for your voice
Or the brush of your arms against wheat
Or your steps among poppies
Grown under water.

III. In the hot depth of this summer
In the hot depth of this summer
The morning is close, storm-filled.
Clouds shift: white rags waving goodbye,
Shaken by the frantic wind as it goes.
And as it goes the wind throbs over us
Whom love-making has silenced.

IV. Close your eyes
Close your eyes wherein the slow night stirs,
Strip off your clothes. (O frightened statue!)
Like new-cut flowers your arms, your lap as rose.

Close your eyes wherein the slow light stirs,
Breasts like paired spirals,
Lap as rose, and rosy shadows in your thighs.
The slow night stirs within your eyes,
My quiet one.

Rainfall. From the sea a stray gull.
The rain walks barefoot through the street.
Leaves on the trees are moaning like the sick.

Though the white bee has gone
That part of me the world calls soul
Still hums and the world is not so wide
I cannot hear its bell
Turn in the spirals of grey wind.
My quiet one. Strip off your clothes.
My quiet one.

V. The Fortunate Isles
Drunk as drunk on trementine
From your open kisses,
Your wet body wedged
Between my wet body and the strake
Of our boat that is made out of flowers,
Feasted, we guide it—our fingers
Like tallows adorned with yellow metal—
Over the sky’s hot trim,
The day’s last breath in our sails.
Pinned by the sun between solstice
And equinox, drowsy and tangled together
We drifted for months and woke
with the bitter taste of land on our lips,
Eyelids all sticky, and we longed for lime
And the sound of a rope
Lowering a bucket down its well. Then,
We came by night to the Fortunate Isles,
And lay like fish
Under the net of our kisses.

VI. Sometimes
Sometimes it’s like
You are dead
When you say nothing.

Or you heard things I say, and
Could not be bothered to reply.

And your eyes, sometimes,
Move outside of you,
Watching the two of us, yes,
As if after you turned to the wall,
Somebody’s kisses stopped your mouth.

VII. We have lost even this twilight
We have lost even this twilight.
No one saw us this evening hand in hand
While the blue night dropped on the world.

I have seen from my window
The fiesta of sunset in the distant mountaintops.

I remembered you with my soul clinched
In that sadness of mine that you know.

Where were you then?
Who else was there?
Saying what words?
Why does the whole of love come on me suddenly
When I am sad and feel you far away?

The book I read each night fell down,
And my coat fell down
Like a hurt dog at my feet.

Each dusk you drew further out,
Out where the dusk shifts, masking statues.
VIII. Tonight I can write
Tonight I can write the saddest lines.
Write, for example: "The night is starry
And the blue stars shiver in the distance."
The nightwind revolves in the sky and sings.

Tonight I can write the saddest lines.
I loved her and sometimes she loved me too.
Through nights like this I held her in my arms.
I kissed her so many times under the infinite sky.

She loved me, sometimes I loved her too.
How could one not have loved her great staring eyes?
Tonight I can write the saddest lines.
To think that I do not have her. To feel that I have lost her.
What does it matter that my love could not keep her?
The night is starry and she is not with me.
This is all. Far away someone is dreaming. Far away.
The same night that makes the same trees white.

We, of that time, are no longer the same.
I no longer love her, it is true, but how much I loved her!
Another’s. She will be another’s. As she was before my kisses.
Her voice, her bright body. her infinite eyes.
I no longer lover her, it is true, but maybe I love her...
Love is so short, forgetting is so long.
Even though this be the last pain that she cause me
And these the last verses that I write for her.

IX. Cemetery of kisses
Cemetery of kisses, there is still fire in your tombs,
Still the fruited boughs burn, pecked at by birds.
Oh the bitten mouth, oh the kissed limbs,
Oh the hungering teeth, oh the entwined bodies,
Oh the mad coupling of hope and force
In which we merged and despaired.
This was our destiny and it was the voyage of our longing.
And in it all our longing fell, in us all was shipwreck!
It is the hour of departure, the hard cold hour
That night enforces on all timetables.
Forsaken like the wharves at dawn.
Oh farther than everything! Oh farther than everything!
It is the hour of departure. Forsaken!